

Review of *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai`i and Oceania* by Maile Arvin (Duke University Press)

by Christine Rosenfeld | Book Reviews, Issue 9.1 (Spring 2020)

ABSTRACT Arvin explains how dispossessing Polynesians was predicated on a logic of settler colonialism inflected by white supremacy. Casting Polynesians as white—specifically, as “almost white”—as opposed to distancing Polynesians from Caucasians, simultaneously provided white settlers the justification they needed to occupy large swaths of Oceania and precluded Polynesians from enjoying the full set of rights available to non-almost whites. By establishing a clear racial continuity between settlers and Polynesians, possession through whiteness made whiteness indigenous to the islands; doing so “suited [settlers’] own claims of belonging to Polynesia while [also soothing] colonizers’ racial anxieties about those they dispossessed.” Throughout the book, Arvin argues that anti-Blackness was as pronounced and as integral in possessing Polynesians as whiteness and calls for future research that more centrally examines the specific and nuanced functions of whiteness, Blackness, and Indigeneity in Melanesian and Micronesian contexts.

KEYWORDS anti-Blackness, Hawai`i, Polynesia, settler colonialism, whiteness

Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai`i and Oceania. By Maile Arvin. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2019, 328 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-0633-6. US List: \$27.95.

Colonialism and settler colonialism are often associated with logics and practices of *exclusion* and *dispossession*, but Maile Arvin’s *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai`i and Oceania* argues that dispossessing Polynesians was and is predicated on a logic of *inclusion*, specifically a logic of settler colonialism inflected by white supremacy. Casting Polynesians as white—specifically as “almost white” (3)—as opposed to distancing Polynesians from Caucasians, simultaneously provided white settlers the justification they needed to occupy large swaths of Oceania and precluded Polynesians from enjoying the full set of rights available to non-almost whites. By establishing a clear racial continuity between settlers and Polynesians, possession through whiteness made whiteness indigenous to the islands; doing so “suited [settlers’] own claims of belonging to Polynesia while [also soothing] colonizers’ racial anxieties about those they dispossessed” (4). Throughout the book, Arvin argues that anti-Blackness was as pronounced and as integral in possessing Polynesians as whiteness and calls for future research that more centrally examines the specific and nuanced functions of whiteness, Blackness, and Indigeneity in Melanesian and Micronesian contexts.

The book, which has thorough chapter and section summaries throughout, is divided into two main parts. Part I is devoted to historicizing the logic of possession through whiteness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Part II is devoted to illustrating how possession through whiteness haunts Polynesians today and how individuals and communities act to unsettle this lingering possession.

Collectively, Arvin's dataset includes social scientific literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; transcripts of 1930s interviews and court case and hearing testimony; pop culture objects like the hula girl; and art. Her methodology draws on discourse analysis and the Indigenous feminist framework of regeneration. The latter is particularly pronounced in Part II and placed alongside the theorizations of Native American scholars, particularly Audra Simpson.

In Chapter 1, Arvin details how Western scientific literature from the nineteenth century dealt with "the Polynesian problem," which aimed to determine the origin of the Polynesian race by coding Indigenous Polynesians as Aryan settlers of the islands. Situating whiteness back in time in terms of Polynesian identity established the spatio-temporal continuity of whiteness among Polynesians that was necessary to make whiteness indigenous to Polynesia, thus justifying white settler colonialism and associated land occupations. However, the Polynesian-as-white narrative conveniently positioned Polynesians as degenerative due to their geographical isolation and therefore in need of restoration to their former Aryan glory. This aspect of the narrative explained the "almost" white character of Polynesians which legitimated their continued disenfranchisement in comparison to white settlers.

Chapter 2 outlines the work of physical anthropologists and eugenicists in the early twentieth century who collectively coded Polynesians as some degree of Caucasian—"conditionally Caucasian" (67)—in distinct opposition to the Black Melanesian race. Racial mixing between Polynesians and whites was viewed by some scientists as a way out of Indigenous degenerative existence and by others as a dilution of pure and celebrated Hawaiianness of times-past. Measuring Hawaiians' biological features provided evidence of similarity to Caucasians, while maintaining a 'just-enough' racial distance to the whiteness of settlers. Arvin shows how the work of these scientists forged the concept of part and full Hawaiian, which provides the foundation for continued possession through whiteness, as part Hawaiian can never fully reach the degree of whiteness necessary to dissolve settler power. She writes that "racial mixture was the discourse that allowed scientists to measure and ensure the progress of this possession [of Polynesians]" (206).

Chapter 3 takes up the familiar hula girl icon and pairs it alongside interview data of members of the public in Hawai`i from social scientists in the 1930s, an unlikely duo at first glance. While Arvin's analysis of over 200 interview transcripts from nearly 100 years ago is unique, its validity is of some concern for reasons she admits herself, including the time passed since the interviews and not knowing the exact questions asked. However, paired together, these two objects effectively reveal and represent the hatred *and* allure for Hawaiians that coexisted in the early to mid-twentieth century, a paradox that Arvin argues was made possible by the old standby: possession through whiteness. Across both datasets, it is the "almost" white, or mixed raced, trait of Polynesians that inspires disdain for Hawaiians perceived to be of the Black Melanesian type and lust for Hawaiians. It was precisely because of the Hawaiian girl's racial hybridity, which Arvin writes—echoing Tavia Nyong'o—encouraged white settler men to "think of themselves as experimental breeders,

doing their heterosexual reproductive duty for the United States in turning Hawai`i whiter" (118).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 advance the reader into the twenty-first century and while Arvin addresses her decision to gloss over the middle and late twentieth century, the time skip still feels a bit awkward and, in some ways, inconsistent with the first half of the book. Regardless, Part II instantly hooks the reader in both its shift towards envisioning Hawaiian futures that disrupt possession through whiteness and its orientation around familiar and contemporary legal cases, genomic projects, and art. These are Arvin's objects of analysis that she reads through the Indigenous feminist framework of regeneration, interpreting them as acts of refusal, and as such as unsettling possession through whiteness.

Chapter 4 complements knowledge that readers who are oriented with blood quantum laws in Hawai`i may already have. Arvin examines court transcripts from the *Day v. Apolina* case, revealing how Hawaiians' advocacy for stricter enforcement of blood quantum laws exemplifies how the logic of possession through whiteness lingers about—or, as Arvin says, haunts—contemporary Indigenous struggles. She contrasts this with the explicit rejection of blood quantum as expressed through testimony from Department of Interior hearings, which she interprets as an effective type of regenerative refusal—one that unmakes logics of possession through whiteness and as such contributes to decolonization and anticolonialism.

Chapter 5 reads like a direct follow-up to Part I in its important consideration of how the Polynesian Problem continues to influence contemporary genomic science through genetic mapping, direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry tests, and the Hawaiian Genome Project. Equally significant, however, is Arvin's attention to the various individual and collective refusals of genomic science, refusals that (re)define Indigeneity and Hawaiianness within Polynesian epistemologies and visions for the future. Arvin's commitment to contextualizing and broadening her own theorizations outside the Polynesian context is clear in her discussion of how objects like direct-to-consumer genetic ancestry tests may provide a very different kind of regenerative potential in some African American and Native American contexts than they do in the Polynesian realm.

Art is the canvas on which Arvin examines acts of refusal as regeneration in Chapter 6. She interprets the work of various artists as efforts to place Hawaiians in spaces from which they have been displaced by settler colonialism. She builds on the work of Jennifer Doyle and Audra Simpson to theorize how art serves as a means of disrupting possession through whiteness in addition to noting "an enjoyment accompanying a confident refusal of the assumption that Indigenous peoples are doomed to disappear and become the possessions of whiteness" (222).

Possessing Polynesians is a captivating read that casts science of times-past as (unfortunately) science of times-present. Scholars positioned within settler colonialism, Pacific studies, critical race studies, and women and gender studies will find the analysis in this book useful in contextualizing their own work and in signaling further pathways of research on which to embark. In showing how inclusion—as opposed to exclusion—can result in discursive and material violence, Arvin's book is also of use to scholars who do work on multiculturalism and recognition.

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Christine Rosenfeld is an Assistant Professor of Geography at George Mason University (GMU). She received her doctorate in Cultural Studies from GMU, her M.S. degree in Geography from the Pennsylvania State University (PSU), and her B.A. degrees in Geography and Spanish from PSU. She is under contract with University of Nebraska Press for her first book which is based around her dissertation research regarding socio-cultural struggle in and about the Saddle region of the Big Island. Her other research pertains to the changing Arctic landscape and conflict early warning systems; she is part of an NSF-funded research team regarding this work. Previously, she has published articles related to research completed with the Smithsonian regarding digital volunteers and has presented at various national conferences about historical tourism landscapes in Cuba and contemporary struggle in Hawaii's Saddle. She currently teaches political geography, human geography, and major world regions.

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